

JOINT AGENCY RESEARCH REPORT

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# KENYA

## Year 3 findings from the Life in a Time of Food Price Volatility Study in Mukuru and Lango Baya, Kenya

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study is to investigate and document poor people's experiences of food price volatility in Kenya. The study focused on two communities, Mukuru, Nairobi County (urban) and Lango Baya, Kilifi County (rural) over the course of three years. This year, in addition to exploring themes relating to wellbeing, coping strategies in the face of relatively high and volatile prices and effects on unpaid care and social relations, the research focused on processed and pre-prepared foods. We asked about the adequacy and acceptability of the food people are eating in the research communities, focusing specifically on how food habits and customs are being influenced by processed foods and foods perceived to be unsafe. In particular, we were interested in a) the incentives for the consumption of processed foods, b) the worries attached to their consumption and c) the structures in place to address some of these concerns.

In this report we highlight some of the findings from this year's research and put forward some of the implications for institutions.

## 2 COUNTRY CONTEXT

Kenya experienced a below average agricultural production in 2014. One of the drivers of food insecurity in the country was the cumulative effects of two consecutive seasons with low rainfall: the October-December 2013 short rains and the March –May 2014 long rains. Other contributing factors included staple-food and non-food prices that were above their five-year averages, and crop diseases in the high potential areas, which reduced national maize production (FEWSNET, 2014).

The Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) September 2014 report also shows that inflation increased by 3.3 per cent between March and August 2014. The overall rate of inflation as at September was 6.6 per cent. Additionally, between August and September 2014, the food and non-alcoholic drinks index increased by 0.58 percent. The aggregate rise resulted from observed increases in the prices of several food commodities outweighing notable falls in the prices of others.

Inflationary pressure from the past six months increased the cost of living against relatively constant household incomes, eroding the purchasing power of poor households. However, it decreased slightly in September and national stocks of staple foods such as maize, beans, rice, and wheat increased at the same time (from July to September 2014), partly due to domestic production but also as a result of imports from neighbouring countries. This resulted in a gradual, seasonal decline in staple food prices from September, at the time in which we were doing the fieldwork. We found farmers in Lango Baya having just harvested some food. The harvests were considered much better than those of September 2013. Consequently the prices of maize and maize flour had reduced and the respondents felt better off than the previous year.

As recently as 2014, the government has initiated measures to bring down the cost of maize production by providing subsidized fertilizers to farmers, but this has not worked well since the fertilizer has been in insufficient quantity. In addition, the onset of the March/April long rains came earlier than expected and most farmers were not ready for planting. Production has also been constrained by underlying drawbacks such as soil acidification due to year-in-year-out usage of Diamonium phosphate (DAP) fertilizer. As a long term measure, the government has initiated an ambitious plan to put about 1 million hectares under irrigation in the Galana/Kulalu areas of the North Coast. However,

no production has been anticipated in this project in 2014/2015 period (Gitonga, 2014). It is reported that the model farm, which is being used as a demonstration block will be ready for the first maize crop planting in July 2015 (Business Daily, July 2015).

Other factors affecting food security in Kenya include devolution which came into force after the 2010 referendum and consequent adoption of a new Constitution. Although with low capacity, Counties now have the mandate to make policies relating to food security at the local level as well as monitor and manage drought. Drought, especially in the northern drylands, is a highly sensitive political issue in Kenya. Many of the drought-hit areas experience ethnic and political tensions. Most of these areas have benefitted for many years from substantial food and cash transfer programs, and there is a high level of interest in keeping these programs unchanged (Rembold *et al.*, 2014). Lango Baya does not however fall under the same category of agro-ecological zone and therefore does not share in the benefits of the food and cash transfer programmes.

The current government is still committed to expanding and maintaining the cash transfer programme dubbed “*Inua Jamii*” (translated to mean uplifting the lives of families). At the end of January 2015, the government promised to release about Ksh. 29 billion to more than 400,000 needy Kenyans to improve their living standards. Beneficiaries of this programme include the elderly, orphans and vulnerable children, and those with severe disabilities. Selection of the beneficiaries will be done by the Ministry of Labour, Social Security and Services. The beneficiaries will undergo a biometric registration to prevent duplication and mismanagement of funds (Daily Nation, January 30, 2015).

## 3 FIELD RESEARCH FINDINGS IN 2014 AND CHANGE OVER THE THREE YEARS

### Well-being of households and individuals

In both our research sites, Mukuru and Lango Baya, the pace of change has slowed since the previous round of research carried out in 2013 in terms of what people are eating, the work they are doing and generally family and society. However, despite the prices of most goods and essential commodities stabilising in the year 2014, our research participants, especially in Mukuru, still felt that the cost of living remained high. Life, according to them was in a way getting harder every year. This is partly because of the fact that despite the stabilizing food prices, the incomes of the majority did not improve and some even lost their jobs. The problem of youth unemployment for example seems to have escalated last year with the ending of the *Kazi Kwa Vijana* government initiative - loosely translated to mean jobs for the youth. The youth as well as other categories of people struggled to find work more last year than they did in the previous years in Mukuru.

In Lango Baya, things were relatively better in 2014 due to sufficient rainfall and improved harvests; maize harvests increased and vegetables were plenty in the farms. Almost all respondents reported having some food from the farm enough for consumption in the coming months. They also reported buying less food items from the shops than they did during the previous round of research. In the shops, prices of maize flour (*unga*) went down due to relatively good maize harvests in the same area. However, despite this being the case in Lango Baya, overall the country experienced a below average total agriculture production in 2014, as mentioned in the introduction.

In Mukuru, women also reported much more competition for casual jobs such as washing clothes in the year 2014 compared to the previous years, with more women coming from far away to look for the same jobs in the middle-class residential areas bordering the slum. Generally, in both sites, people are engaging in more than one job in a single day so as to supplement their income. This is not new in Mukuru but in Lango Baya it is an upcoming trend. For example, in Mukuru, it is not uncommon to find someone fetching water for sale in the surrounding estates in the morning, only to find them later hawking or washing clothes in the case of women or touting in the case of young men. In Lango Baya, people reported working as casual labourers on two different farms in a single day, one in the morning and the other in the afternoon, while some took to *boda boda* (motorbike) business in the afternoon.

The year 2014 also witnessed a higher crime rate in Mukuru slum than in the previous years under study. With high cost of living and few work opportunities, many of the youths are ganging up to rob people within and outside the slum as a survival strategy. In addition, more house evictions were reported in the previous year than before in Mukuru. This perhaps being a factor of wages failing to keep up with inflation.

Lastly, people are choosing to eat more of the foods cooked outside the home than ever before, especially in Mukuru. These foods are preferred because they are cheap, ready for consumption, easily available and can be packed in small quantities which people can afford. In as much as this might be a coping strategy, those who are engaging in this food business seem to be doing better than those in other types of businesses. Most of them have increased the quantity of food they sell and many more are likely to join the business in future. In Mukuru, some respondents reported entering the business last year, particularly those who were already selling uncooked vegetables by the roadside earlier on.

*'This year, more people are buying cooked food. Last year, there were fewer people selling the food. Today, even those who were selling vegetables have started selling the food. Others have bought bigger saucepans to cook in. The food rarely goes to waste. Their businesses have grown... Mrs K, 38-year-old business woman, Mukuru.*

## Support and social protection

In both sites, the level of support from formal sources was lower in 2014 compared to the previous year. Most NGOs that had programmes in the two sites either withdrew completely or gave less support. In Mukuru, respondents argued that some NGOs may have left the area due to security reasons including fears of terrorist attacks. Additionally, the government did not offer emergency relief food in either site as was the case in the previous year. In Lango Baya however, the farmers were given maize seeds and benefited from school bursaries from the government much more than they did in the previous year. All in all, the churches and mosques in both sites seem to be much more consistent in terms of their assistance compared to all the other formal sources of support for the respondents.

Informal sources of support have not changed much from the previous year. Neighbours, relatives and groups are still the most dependable in times of need. These informal support systems work all the time, in times of plenty and scarcity.

## Processed and unsafe foods

There are many different types of processed and unsafe foods that are being consumed by the respondents in both sites. These foods are similar in many ways in both sites but in Mukuru there is a much broader range of foods available, especially those that are prepared in open areas along the streets and/or by the roadsides. These kinds of food include but are not limited to: *githeri* (mixed boiled beans and maize), *chappatis*, *mandazi* (doughnuts), chips and *bhajias*, deep fried potatoes and

cassava, sweet potatoes, roasted bananas, cakes, chicken parts (feet, neck, gizzards), fish parts, sausages, *samosas*, barbequed meat (*mshikaki*), beef parts (feet and tongue), boiled eggs, bone soup, porridge, tea, milk etc.

The reasons why people are choosing these foods vary. To start with, these foods are readily available and accessible in terms of price and also because they are found in convenient places, on the way home from school or work. They are also cheaper than buying ingredients and cooking at home. If one is cooking the same type of food at home for example, in addition to buying ingredients, they also need to buy cooking oil/fat and cooking energy mainly charcoal, firewood or kerosene. In addition, the foods are sold in small quantities, which are affordable. Buying ready food also saves time for the respondents and some reported that the food is sweet and provides variety, which most people are not able to get at home. Because women are seeking paid work outside the home to earn an income and feed their families, they have less time to cook and therefore prefer these foods. This essentially saves them time and energy. A few respondents, however, attribute the increasing trend of consuming these foods to laziness, for example, women refusing to cook at home because of laziness.

Respondents have a number of worries concerning the processed and unsafe foods that they are consuming. The main worry revolves around the hygiene of the environment in which the food is prepared, as well as the hygiene of the person preparing the food. In Mukuru, it was reported that some of these foods are prepared near open sewers and those preparing them are not clean and are also not certified by the Ministry of Health to handle food or operate a food business. There is also the fear of chemicals, which are supposedly added to the food such as *githeri* and beans to make it boil or cook faster. This chemical referred to as soda ash was mentioned in both sites and is said to weaken the bones. The ingredients were also a concern, especially in the case of *samosas* where the respondents thought that the meat used to stuff them is not beef but could be donkey, cat, or rat meat.

The oil used for frying chips, *bhajias*, *samosas*, *mandazi* etc. is also a concern. Some respondents argued that it is recycled too many times making it turn black and there is also suspicion that it could be mixed with oil stolen from electric transformers so as to make it last longer. Also, sometimes the food is not well cooked inside and this is the case particularly for chicken parts. Milk was also said to be adulterated and preserved using some chemicals that are used in morgues. In Lango Baya, there was concern over the foods having too much spices and this was seen as a potential health problem particularly for the aged. In addition, the respondents were concerned about the possible recycling of leftover food especially in the food kiosks.

Lastly in both sites, there were social concerns over the increasing consumption of these foods. In Mukuru, female respondents were concerned by the increasing trend of their husbands consuming these foods and failing to provide the same for the other members of the family at home. In Lango Baya there were fears that the trend could be interfering with the culture of eating together as a family at home.

In both sites, there are mechanisms that have been put in place to regulate the cooking and selling of these foods but they are in most instances weak or inactive. In Mukuru for example, community health workers have tried to sensitize the people about the hazards associated with foods cooked on the street and even sometimes patrolling around the village to ensure that no food is cooked near the drainage or in unhygienic environment, but this has only helped to a small extent. This is because the community health workers cannot patrol the village everyday and when they are not doing so, the food vendors go back to their old ways. In addition, food poisoning instances have been reported to the area chief but nothing much has been done to those responsible; the chief can only give warnings to the food vendors. Generally, most of the respondents have done little in terms of taking action against those food vendors who are dirty or cooking in unhygienic places or selling food that is not fresh; most reported that when they hear or get to know that someone is adding chemicals to make food cook faster such as bicarbonate of soda, they just stop buying from them.

*"I have not done anything about it because if I report, somebody may think that I want to bring down their businesses and in this slum, people can even plan to kill you. If you report this to the government they will come in not really to help but to get money from those in this food business because all they are interested with is money but not the health of the people."* Mr PK, 61 year old businessman and community health worker, Mukuru.

In Lango Baya however, the regulation mechanisms seem to work a bit better than in Mukuru. There is a public health officer who is known by the people and goes round where food is prepared and sold and gives people information regarding food hygiene. The problem with Lango Baya is that unlike Mukuru, most of the food is prepared in people's homes and thereafter the vendors pack and sell it on the streets in the shopping centres. Therefore it is difficult to know how that food was prepared. However, most of those running small food hotels have hygiene permits from the public health office, which are only valid for a certain period of time and renewed thereafter. In addition, those who sell snacks outside schools to children have to get authorization from the same public health officer and the head teacher of the school.

## 4 ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

### Links between local, national and global conditions and actions

In the course of the three years that we have collected data for this study, we have noted some links between what is happening locally, nationally and globally. For example, in 2014, global food prices fell significantly and this was also reflected at the national level with prices of most food commodities stabilizing. It would be naturally expected that with this development the well-being of the people at the local level would significantly improve. However, this was not necessarily the case. In Mukuru for example, respondents did not feel better off because the prices of essential non-food items were still on the rise, such as rent and cooking energy. In addition, their wages were still stagnant and there were even cases of loss of jobs especially for the youth who were previously depending on the government's *kazi kwa vijana* initiative. There has however been recent efforts by the government in engaging the youth through revamping and expanding the National Youth Service (NYS)<sup>1</sup> in late 2014. Recruitment of the youth started in November 2014, a month after completing the fieldwork for this study. We think that some youths in Mukuru might have been recruited into the programme. Unfortunately, at present, this programme is facing graft allegations and it remains to be seen how these allegations will be resolved and whether NYS will continue or not.

Again, for rural Lango Baya, though respondents felt better off, it was not because of stable food prices but because of sufficient rainfall in the previous season which translated into good harvests. Respondents had enough food in their farms and therefore depended less on the markets. Additionally, we found out that though prices of vegetables are dependent on seasons, the same cannot be said for products such as maize and sugar. Other factors come into play in determining the prices of these staples such as the role of traders and millers in maintaining high prices through market manipulation.

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<sup>1</sup> National Youth Service is a government department established by an Act of Parliament in 1964. The twin purposes of the programme were to create a pool of technical, disciplined and organised human resource to undertake national development programmes and to alleviate youth unemployment in both formal and informal sectors by providing skills necessary for employment while promoting national cohesion. These objectives remain relevant to date.

## Changes in Food Habits

Over the three years under study we have observed some changes in our research communities but two are particularly significant. First is a shift towards consumption of more processed and unsafe foods. Although this is happening in both rural and urban areas, it is much more evident amongst the urban poor. There are concerns about the hygiene and safety of these foods but nothing much has been done to address them. There is another angle to the consumption of these foods - the cooking and selling of these foods seen as an opportunity. In 2014, in Mukuru, we found some respondents who previously sold vegetables having moved to trading in these foods and those who were already in the business had expanded significantly. If the trend continues, more people are going to join this business.

Second relates to the formal sources of social support available to the study respondents. During the first two years of the study, we noted the presence of a considerable number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in both sites who provided food, medical and farm support to respondents. In fact in 2013, NGOs and churches were rated highly in responding to food insecurity by respondents. However, by 2014, many NGOs had pulled away especially in Mukuru, yet respondents were not sure why. Therefore in our analysis of the three years, we have observed a decline in the formal social support and more reliance on informal sources of support such as friends, neighbours, relatives and informal savings groups.

## 5 CONCLUSION

This report has highlighted the findings of the third and last round of the “Life in a Time of Food Price Volatility” study in Kenya. It has explored themes on wellbeing of households and individuals, support and social protection and processed and unsafe foods. We have found out that even after much more stable food prices, the wellbeing of the poor has not improved, especially the urban poor due to other factors. Specifically we note that jobs and stable incomes are extremely important for this group of people who obtain almost all of their food needs from the market. This finding suggests that wages, work conditions and access to secure employment may be some of the most important elements of policy initiatives to address food price volatility.

We have also noted that processed and pre-prepared foods have become part and parcel of the lives of the urban and rural poor, mainly due to higher food prices, demand for more convenient foods and changing work patterns. The cooked food business has also been embraced as an opportunity by some. Although people have concerns (mainly safety and hygiene) about these foods, they continue to consume them as they do not have much choice and where they have voiced their concerns to the local authorities, there has been little response. This suggests that government should do more to regulate unsafe food and promote popular understanding of foods that are healthy and nutritious.

In terms of formal social support, we have observed that the poor are mostly on their own. Few sources of support are consistent and people have stopped expecting from these sources, choosing to depend more on informal social support mechanisms and networks which have always served them in plenty and in scarcity. As Kenyans become increasingly dependent on the market for their basic needs, they also become increasingly vulnerable to the market's fluctuations. It calls for a more effort by government and civil society to design comprehensive systems of social insurance.



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